

the Pope's leave to hear confessions and give absolution. The friar had a certain district allotted to him in the neighbourhood of his convent; he was licensed, like the later Scotch < gaberlunzie,' to go the rounds of this district, and there to make what money he could. He had many advantages over the parson—sometimes greater learning, usually brighter wit, always later news and more general knowledge of the world outside the parish. But among the baser means which he used to attract the poor man's congregation to himself and to pocket the Church fees, was the readiness with which he sold absolution.

He was an esy man to yeve penatmce,
Ther as he wist to have a good pittaunce;
For unto a poore order for to yive
Is signe that a man is wel y-shrive.¹

When people dare not confess to their priest,

shame maketh them wend, And
flee to the friars as false folk to
Westmynster; *

they fly to the friars' confessional for refuge from their sins, as fraudulent debtors take sanctuary in Westminster Abbey.

Twenty years before Wycliffe's attack was made, Fitz-Ralph Bishop of Armagh had laid a famous indictment of the four orders before the Pope at Avignon. It made a great stir at the time, but came to nothing, for the friars were under the Pope's special protection. The Bishop chiefly complained of their competition with his secular clergy in the matter of confession and absolution. He brought forward some curious statistics, which, even if exaggerated, give a curious picture of life in Ireland in the fourteenth century. * I have/ he said, * in my diocese of Armagh two thousand persons a year (as I think) who are excommunicated for wilful homicide, public robbery, arson and similar acts ; of whom scarcely forty in a year come to me or my parish priests for confession.'³ On this side St. George's Channel the state of society was somewhat less turbulent, but a like demand existed for the friars' easy

¹ Chaucer, Prologue to *Cant. Tales*.

« P. *PL*, B, xx. 281; A, iii. 36-50, B ; xi. 63-4 ; *Pol. Poems*, ii. 46.

⁹ Brown's *Fasciculus*, ii. 468.